

The Apostle Paul's Pandemic Economics

A sermon on 1 Corinthians 12:12-31a by Nathan Nettleton, 23 January 2022

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Message

In God's vision for humanity, every person and the role they play is valued and cared for. When society fails to live up to this, the Church is called to go against the flow and courageously champion and model it.

Sermon

In normal times, I have not been one who takes much interest in economics. I thought that economics was only relevant to those who were focussed on making money out of business and investments. But in recent weeks I've realised that there is a lot more to it than that, and that I had it all wrong. A number of opinion pieces in some of my major news sources have captured my attention, and opened my eyes to the important role of economics in the crises we are grappling with in the midst of this pandemic.

There has been both good news and bad for economists in these articles. Some of them have argued that one of the reasons that things are such a mess right now is because we treated this purely as a health crisis and didn't listen to economists enough. Others have agreed with that but also said that the current crises are showing that much of mainstream economic thinking has been wrong, and so even if we had been listening to the economists, the things they were saying might have been part of the problem rather than part of the solution.

Now, this is a sermon in a worship service, not an introductory lecture on economics, but I raise it here because when I read what the Apostle Paul had to say in the reading we heard from his correspondence with the Corinthian church, it reminded me of these articles that had caught my attention recently and made me wonder whether some of these experts might not have thought that, for a theologian, Paul wasn't a bad economist, and that what he was saying was especially important in the midst of our current pandemic-induced economic crises. But let me say a bit more about these economics articles before I come back to Paul and join the dots for you.

Firstly, why does economics actually matter? In [one of the articles spruiking its importance](#), economist Steven Hamilton said that during the pandemic, he has often been told that since he is not a health professional, he should stick to his area of expertise and not make comments about things like vaccine procurement and distribution policies. But, as he rightly points out, while vaccine research and approval is undoubtedly an issue for health scientists, it is economics that is the science of supply and demand, production and distribution. If we want to know how much vaccine will be required for each population and how to set up supply chains to manufacture and distribute the right amounts of it to the right places at the right time, a medical doctor is no better qualified than a musician to work that out. It is economists who are the experts in supply chains.

Or at least they are supposed to be.

At the moment, supply chains are breaking down all over the place, as you will know if you've seen how many empty shelves there are in some of our supermarkets. The breakdowns in the supply chains for vaccines and rapid antigen tests may well be because too much of the decision making was based on advice from health experts instead of also listening to

economists, but the health experts haven't had any say on how to stock supermarkets, so something else has gone wrong, and another group of these articles I've been reading suggest that current circumstances are exposing some very dodgy thinking among mainstream economists.

For example, business reporter [Michael Janda points out](#) that most economists tend to strive for extremes of efficiency and productivity, and that this leads them to champion "just-in-time" supply models and very lean workforces, and that we are currently seeing why those things can be dangerous practices.

Just-in-time supply models say that it is inefficient to be using up lots of space and effort storing raw materials or finished products, so instead you have your suppliers delivering to you every day just enough for your manufacturing needs for that day, and as things are made, you ship them out immediately and don't hold any in reserve. That can work well if everything is in balance and nothing goes wrong. But it only takes one truck to not turn up and your whole manufacturing operation grinds to a halt. And then you can't supply anything just in time to your customers either, and their operation grinds to a halt too. Or if you run a hospital and you don't keep a reserve supply of surgical masks and syringes and oxygen for the ventilators, you'll be in instant trouble if today's truck doesn't turn up.

The idea of lean workforces applies a similar rule of efficiency to staffing. It is very efficient to only employ the minimum number of workers required to get your job done. You don't want people standing around, leaning on shovels, with not enough to do. Now, in most cases, economists will help the bosses to calculate how many workers are likely to be on annual leave or sick leave on average at any time, and factor that in to the staffing requirements, but again, we are now seeing what happens when the drive for efficiency only takes account of normal circumstances.

In abnormal circumstances, it all goes belly-up. If you employ just enough people to cover a normal absentee rate of 10%, what happens when a pandemic means that 40% of your workforce is absent because they're sick, isolating, caring for others who are sick, or caring for small children because there is no childcare available? Now you can't get the job done. That might not be a disaster for society if you were producing fashion clothing, because most of us could survive for years without buying any new clothes, but what happens when our hospitals, aged care facilities, schools, food suppliers, and cleaning services were running lean workforces and just-in-time supplies? Well, we are seeing the disastrous answer to that question all around us now.

What is suddenly obvious, and what some economists and the self-important politicians and business leaders who followed them may have previously been forgetting, is that the single most important component of the economy, of production, distribution and supply, is ordinary workers, ordinary human beings. As economist [Jim Stanford puts it](#), "human beings getting out of bed and going to work... is the only thing that puts food on supermarket shelves, cares for sick people and teaches our children. ... The glorious complexity of the whole economy boils down to human beings ... working to produce goods and services."

Business reporter [Michael Janda picks up on that and says](#) that this "has also reminded those of us paying attention that our most essential workers also happen to be some of our lowest-

paid, while our (arguably) less-essential workers (people who could disappear for weeks without any of us being inconvenienced) are often paid far more.”

He points out that “the fruit and veggie pickers, abattoir workers, truck drivers, warehouse workers, nurses, childcare workers, garbage collectors, cleaners and many others whose daily work is directly essential for others’ wellbeing generally earn much less than the average,” and he argues that if so “many of the people whose work is most valued by others in society are among those least valued by that society in a monetary sense” then surely there is “something fundamentally wrong with (economics,) a social science concerned with distribution.”

Which brings me back to the Apostle Paul and what we heard him saying to the church in Corinth.

Paul too is saying that our communities are made up of human beings who are all connected to each other and who all depend on everyone else carrying out their roles, which means that we need to value everyone for the roles they play and provide adequate support and care to ensure that the whole community can function. Most of us are familiar with Paul using the metaphor of the body to speak of the church. But what if we subbed in the word economy, or society? Listen:

The society or economy does not consist of one worker but of many. There are many workers, yet one society or economy. The eye cannot say to the hand, “I have no need of you,” nor again the head to the feet, “I have no need of you.” On the contrary, the workers that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and those workers that we think less honourable we clothe with greater honour, and our less prestigious workers are treated with greater respect; whereas our more prestigious workers do not need this. But God has so arranged society, giving the greater honour to the inferior worker, that there may be no dissension within the economy, but the workers may have the same care for one another. If one worker suffers, all suffer together with them; if one worker is honoured, all rejoice together with them.

I’m not suggesting for a moment that what Paul is saying applies only to those in some sort of paid work, but since workplace economics is what we have been talking about, I’m illustrating it from there. It is much wider than that, but perhaps you can see that when what he says is applied to the current economic crisis in the midst of the covid health crisis, Paul is actually singing from the same song sheet as some of these economics journalists that I’ve been quoting.

Stepping back, and looking at the bigger picture, Paul is actually telling us about God’s original and continuing vision for humanity. This is not a vision of rugged individuals, competing with one another for supremacy, and all fighting for their own personal rights over and against the interests of one another. To use Paul’s body metaphor, that kind of everyone for themselves individualism would be like what happens in a body when it gets cancer, or when the body starts rejecting one of its own organs. Parts of the body stop working in harmony with one another and turn on one another, and the end result is the death of all of them. No part of the body can ultimately remain healthy if some parts choose to hoard all the resources and starve the others. All will die.

Perhaps we are seeing that more clearly lately than we have for a long time. For the first year or so of this pandemic, we did a pretty good job of all sacrificing our own wishes to work together on suppressing the virus, and we were quite successful. But then more and more people began getting tired and angry and sick of it all, and there were plenty of agitators ready to rev them up with rhetoric about standing up for their individual rights, and not letting anyone tell them what to do. The body of society stopped seeing itself as a body, and its parts turned on one another and tried to go their own way.

Paul is telling us that the whole of humanity has been created as a single body, as in interdependent whole. Although he doesn't say it here, I think that Paul would happily extend that and agree that the whole planet, the whole natural world including the human race as an integrated part of it, is created as a single body where the health of each of its parts is ultimately dependent on the health of all of its parts and on the health of the way they connect and cooperate and care for one another. If one part, one person, one community, one species suffers, all suffer together with them; and if one part flourishes in a way that is not parasitic but generous and healthy, then all benefit.

But when the body stops caring for itself, when it ignores the needs or welfare of some of its parts and leaves them to suffer, the whole body begins to breakdown and slowly die. If we ignore the needs of our nurses, or allow our veggie pickers to work in near slavery conditions, or leave the Tongans to their fate, or turn a blind eye to genocidal destruction of Aboriginal cultures and communities, or do nothing while yet another species goes extinct, the whole body, the whole society, the whole economy, the whole planet begins to breakdown and slowly die.

You might think I'm drawing a long bow here, and that actually Paul only says this about the church, and not about the economy or the ecosystem of the planet. And that's almost true within the confines of this short passage, but Paul is making his argument about the Church by applying his understanding of God's vision for the whole of humanity and the whole of creation. He is not suggesting it as a helpful idea. He is saying that this is the way it is. We have been created as one in God, in Christ, as one interdependent body.

You are right that Paul says we are baptised into this body when he is talking about the church, but being baptised into the Church is part of God's rescue mission for a world gone wrong. If the world had continued to function as the healthy interdependent mutually-caring whole that God created it to be, there would be no need for the Church as a separate entity within it. Just as Jesus wouldn't have had to stand up in that synagogue and say "The Spirit of the Lord has anointed me to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives, to let the oppressed go free" (Luke 4:14-21), if there had never been any who were poor or captive or oppressed. What Jesus is doing, and what his body the Church is to be doing, is setting right things that have gone wrong and are sick and dysfunctional and dying.

So, if we wonder what our mission as Christ's Church is in this present world, there is the genesis of the answer. In a world that thinks in terms of prestige and hierarchies and fails to value many of its most essential members, we as the Church are to exist as a counter-sign, as a prophetic community who holds out against the social tide and stands as a living example of how we are supposed to be, valuing everyone, caring for everyone, seeking the welfare and flourishing of everyone.

In a world where the social fabric is tearing apart, and increasing numbers of people have been sucked in to the demonic ideologies that say that you are in competition with everyone else, and it's winner takes all, and the most important things to defend and fight for is your own personal rights, your own personal freedoms, free of any responsibility to think of what's best for anyone else; is such a world, we as the Church are to exist as a counter-sign, as a prophetic community who holds out against the social tide and stands as a living example of how we are supposed to be, an interdependent global community who seek first the good of the whole community, even when it means sacrificing something of our own isolated interests in favour of being part of a healthier whole. We are to be a community shaped in the image of the one who would rather allow himself to be crucified than to demand his own freedom and rights and prestige at the expense of others.

If the rest of the world cannot look at us here, and say, "Oh, that's what healthy caring human community looks like", then we have failed to provide any justification for our existence. We wouldn't actually be a church at all.

That's the mission we have been called to. The pandemic and economic crisis haven't changed that, but they have made its urgency and necessity all the more starkly obvious. That's the point of our gathering, our worship, and all our shared activities. That's the journey that Jesus is leading us into. And that's the life in which I am glad to be united to you, in Christ, to live out in these days.